The Washington Daily News

A SCRIPPS-HOWARD NEWSPAPER
"Give light and the people will find their own way"

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FRIDAY, JUNE 30, 1967

1013 13th ST. N.W. (20005) Di. 7-7777

In Metropolitan Washington: By Carrier, 30c per week; $1.30 per month. By Mail: 3 months $3.90; 6 months $7.80; per year, $15.60. Foreign Mail: $2 month, $24 a year. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

The USS Liberty Report

THE U. S. Navy report of its inquiry into the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty during the recent Middle East fighting tells an interesting, and tragic, story. But it does not provide an adequate explanation. It still leaves unanswered the question: Need it have happened?

No doubt, as the Navy court said, the Liberty, a lightly armed communications ship, was properly marked and had a "legal right" to cruise in international waters. But with a war booming on the shore within view, was it a smart thing to do? A pedestrian always has the right of way over a car; but if he gets knocked flat exercising his right on a busy highway, his "legal right" is little consolation.

From the testimony, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the Liberty to move father away from the coast. But, astonishingly, the message did not arrive until hours later, after the attack. Some communications system! Can't the Pentagon fish around in its $75 billion budget and come up with communications that will do the job?

The Commander of the Liberty had authority to move away on his own. If his own Admiral and the Joint Chiefs in Washington thought he should have done so, why didn't it occur to him on the scene? As he testified having told his crew before the attack, the black smoke rising on the beach in full view was evidence the ship "was in a potentially dangerous location."

The Pentagon's first story after the attack was that the Liberty's mission was "to assist in relaying information concerning the evacuation of American dependents and other American citizens" in Middle East countries. But it turns out this merely was a big line. The Liberty was there to pick up radio messages of the Egyptians and Israeli forces fighting on shore. If the Pentagon wants to try that again, it had better find a method that will keep our men farther from the fray.

And what about Israel, whose jets and torpedo boats attacked the American ship, killing 34 and wounding 75 more? Israeli officials regretfully have talked about the "similarity" of the Liberty to an Egyptian supply ship, about an American identification signal "resembling" that of the Egyptians, and about the obscuration of the ship by smoke caused by the air attack. But reconnaissance planes three times overflew the ship (as much as five hours before the attack), according to the American skipper. There was "ample opportunity" to identify the Liberty correctly, the Navy court stated.

Was there a break - down in Israeli communications, or were the Israelis just reckless and trigger - happy?

The Israeli government has promised to make amends. Those amends should be substantial. But Israel never can make amends for the lives lost.

Neither can the military bumbling which led to this costly incident.

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The Washington Daily News, Thursday, June 29, 1967

File (42) USS Liberty

WARNING MESSAGE 'MISROUTED . . . DELAYED'

Liberty Mystery Deepens

By MIKE MILLER
Scripps-Howard Staff Writer

The Navy today left unexplained major elements of the mystery surrounding Israel's attack June 8 on the USS Liberty off the coast of Egypt during the Middle East war.

The Pentagon reported, however, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff messaged the Liberty earlier that day to move farther away from the coastline of the Sinai Peninsula. But the Chiefs' orders were "misrouted, delayed and not received until after the attack," the Defense Department said.

In a summary of the findings of a Navy court of inquiry, the Pentagon said the court "reached no judgment" on whether earlier arrival of the Chiefs' message might have prevented the attack.

34 KILLED

Thirty-four Americans were killed and about 75 wounded in the attack by jet planes and torpedo boats. Israel has apologized and said her forces thought the ship was Egyptian.

The Pentagon said the court could not determine why Israel mounted the attack or whether any of the unidentified planes, presumably Israel's, which passed near the Liberty as much as five hours before the attack had identified it as a U.S. vessel.

But it said there was "ample opportunity" for the planes to identify the Liberty in the "calm, clear weather" by her U.S. Flag and other markings.

"The court affirmed the Liberty's right to be where she was," the Pentagon said. A Neutral nation, the court stated, has a legal right to dispatch a ship into international waters adjacent to an area of hostilities.

"So long as such a neutral ship maintains the impartial attitude of neutrality, the court pointed out, each belligerent has a duty to refrain from attacking her."

The Pentagon made no reference to the Liberty's assigned mission, which it earlier claimed was to assist in communications concerning the evacuation of American citizens.

MONITORING

It was learned later that the Liberty was using her sophisticated electronics and communications gear to monitor messages of the warring countries and provide Washington with intelligence information on progress of the war.

The court said the Liberty was under orders to steam within an area bounded on the south by a line 12.5 miles off Sinai. Egypt claims territorial waters out to 12 miles.

The Liberty never went closer than 13.6 miles and was about 15 miles offshore when attacked, the court said.

The Pentagon said the Joint Chiefs ordered the Liberty to move away from Sinai "even tho such a move would partially degrade her mission." The commanding officer also had the authority to move farther to sea on his own, but the court ruled that he had no reason to believe that the ship was in danger of attack, the Defense Department said.

SURVEILLANCE

The Liberty's skipper, Comdr. William L. McGonagle testified that unidentified planes had the ship under "significant surveillance" three times before the attack.

At about 8 a.m. another flight of jets launched the bombing, strafing and rocket attack which lasted about five or six minutes, Comdr. McGonagle said. About 20 minutes later, he saw three high-speed boats approaching in the formation of a torpedo attack.

Comdr. McGonagle said he ordered a crewman to man one of the Liberty's 50-caliber machine guns and take the boats under fire. He then saw the Israeli flags and realized the previous attack by planes could have been an accident.

The skipper said he yelled to the crewman to hold his fire, but the gunner didn't hear him and fired a short burst. Another of the Liberty's guns then opened fire and struck the center torpedo boat. Crewmen later learned that flames from a burning whaleboat aboard the Liberty trigged the weapon and that it was unmanned when it fired at the Israeli boat.

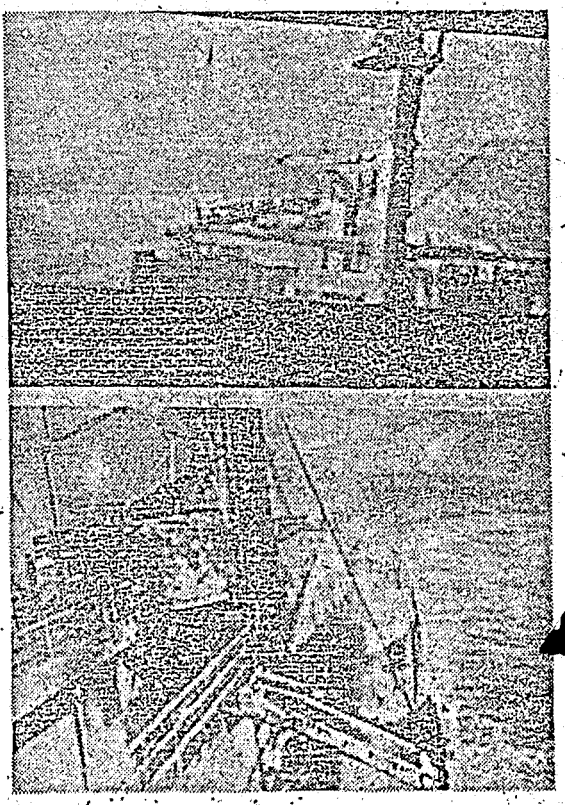
OPENED FIRE

The Israeli boats then opened fire with their guns and two torpedoes, one of which struck the Liberty and tore a 39-foot hole below the waterline. The court said 25 of the dead were killed instantly by the torpedo blast.

Just prior to the battle with the torpedo boats, Comdr. McGonagle noticed that the Liberty's flag had been shot down by the attacking planes and ordered a new and larger one hoisted.

One Israeli boat also attempted to message the Liberty by flashing lights. But the Liberty's lights had also been knocked out, and Comdr. McGonagle tried without success to communicate with a hand-held lamp.

The court said Comdr. McGonagle, who was painfully wounded in the leg during the air attack and at times had to issue orders while lying down, has been recommended for a citation.



—Defense Dept. Photo Via UPI

The Defense Department just released these photos of "Liberty" under attack. Top, Israeli torpedo boat passes ahead of the Liberty. Bottom, Liberty turns during attack.